**Motives Of Foreign Student Recruiters Questioned**

by The Associated Press

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COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) — As American universities welcome ever-greater numbers of international students, some professors and admissions counselors are questioning the motives of the very professionals who have helped attract so many foreign scholars to their campuses.

Higher education recruiters are under fire from detractors who say they put profit ahead of students' best interests. Critics accuse them of sending thousands of unqualified applicants to the U.S. every year, sometimes allowing students to skip basic English tests and falsify applications to make a quick commission.

"The student is best served by having the widest range of information available about what might be the best fit," said Peggy Blumenthal, an executive vice president at the not-for-profit Institute of International Education, which monitors and promotes study abroad programs. Recruiting agents "have a very large incentive to deliver a student who may not be the best fit."

A leading group of admissions counselors even proposed an outright ban on the use of international recruiters who are paid based on the number of students they lure to the United States.

College administrators who rely on recruiters are quick to defend them, saying they are more familiar with overseas customs and school systems.

By using recruiters, Missouri State University leaders "can focus on developing and delivering curriculum instead of going out and recruiting students and developing individual sponsors," said David Meinert, associate dean of the university's business school. Recruiters are "able to deliver as an intermediary something that we would have trouble delivering."

Those efforts have contributed significantly to a sharp spike in the number of foreign students seeking an American education. A recent report by Blumenthal's institute showed a 32 percent increase in the number of international students in the U.S. compared with a decade ago. Nearly a quarter of the students here for the 2010-11 academic year came from China. Many others hailed from India and South Korea.

When Missouri State's Springfield campus decided in 2007 to create an executive M.B.A. program for visiting Chinese students, the school realized it needed a recruiter steeped in that country's language, culture and educational practices.

The university hired the International Management Education Center in Hong Kong under a deal that paid recruiters $10,000 to $12,000 for each graduate student. The school kept the balance of student payments ranging from $15,000 to $22,000.

But some professors question the program's academic rigor, noting participants do not take the English proficiency tests usually required of international students and frequently show up unprepared. When the same doubts that arose in Missouri spread to China, some student sponsors — a term that refers to local governments, schools corporations and other Chinese institutions — said they wanted to withdraw from the program.

Earlier this year, the National Association for College Admission Counseling proposed the ban on the use of some international recruiters out of concern that unscrupulous agents were exaggerating students' English skills and submitting falsified applications in search of a fast financial reward.

Those practices introduce "an incentive for recruiters to ignore the student interest" and invite "complications involving misrepresentation, conflict of interest and fraud," the organization's board said in a May statement.

By July, the group had backed away from the ban, acknowledging a "lack of alternatives" for dispensing information about American higher education in many parts of the world. It plans to study the issue for up to two years.

Serving international students has become big business on campuses struggling with budget cuts. At public schools, foreign students pay pricey out-of-state tuition, and many who attend private institutions receive little to no financial aid.

The report by Blumenthal's group and the U.S. State Department says international students inject $21 billion into the American economy, including money spent on tuition, living expenses and accompanying family members.

Some schools eschew hiring recruiters in favor of building close relationships with international schools in targeted countries.

At Missouri State, Meinert said, the school's partner does not work directly with students or their families. Instead, it seeks deals with sponsors who then steer groups of students toward the program — and continue to offer support after enrollment.

"We're not looking to find an individual, to go hunting for one student at a time," Meinert said. "An agent's relationship with a student ends when they get a check."

Cheating on American college applications is rampant in China, according to Tom Melcher, chairman of Zinch China, a Beijing-based consulting company that works with U.S. universities.

The company surveyed 250 high school seniors and determined that 90 percent of Chinese undergraduate applicants submit phony recommendation letters, 70 percent rely on essays written by others and 50 percent falsify their transcripts.

Melcher attributes the acceptance of cheating in part to "aggressive agents" who typically charge parents $6,000 to $10,000 — and similar-sized bonuses if the student gains admission to a top-ranked school. Those payments do not include fees that agents charge schools, which can be more than 10 percent of tuition.

"Until and unless American schools systematically address cheating on applications from China, the problem will continue to grow," the company report said.

The recruiting industry says it's working to tighten oversight of agents. Supporters liken recruiters to the private admissions counselors used by affluent families to help American students get into the most selective schools. Not long ago, those services were also considered the bane of higher education by opponents who felt that admissions decisions were best kept away from anyone seeking a personal profit.

At Westminster College, a private liberal arts school in the central Missouri town of Fulton, international enrollment has grown from 3 percent less than a decade ago to more than 16 percent.

Most of those students are drawn from an organization called United World Colleges and an ample private scholarship fund. Previous efforts to use recruiters made little difference.

"There are very good recruiters out there who are very solid and do all the right things," said George Wolf, the school's vice president of enrollment management. "And then there are recruiters out there just to a make a buck."

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